DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 470 308 PS 030 819

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TITLE	Dealing with the Dilemmas of K-3 Teaching.
PUB DATE	2002-11-00
NOTE	22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (New York, NY, November 20-23, 2002).
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Standards; Accountability; *Developmentally Appropriate Practices; *Educational Practices; *Elementary School Teachers; Personal Narratives; *Preschool Teachers; *Primary Education; Teacher Attitudes; Teaching (Occupation)

ABSTRACT

This paper serves as a reflective dialog around the special circumstances of teaching in contemporary kindergarten through grade 3 classrooms. Three public school teachers who were prepared to teach in a program emphasizing an understanding of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) describe their experiences teaching in public school classrooms where DAP implementation is significantly constrained. The paper highlights the dilemmas faced by three teachers (kindergarten, first grade, and third grade) as they implement programs they think are appropriate and effective for their students while accommodating the expectations of their school systems that demand accountability and often limit what is to be taught and how it should be taught. None of the teachers had been teaching for more than 4 years. The body of the paper includes examples of how these three young teachers deal with the realities of teaching in public school primary classrooms. After brief introductions to the teacher authors and their settings, the paper recounts each teacher's answers to four questions that organize the paper. These questions represent the essence of the dilemmas and are related to: (1) dealing with pressures for academic achievement and providing developmentally appropriate experiences; (2) meeting the needs of individual children while keeping the whole classroom running smoothly; (3) dealing with expectations from administrators, parents, and other teachers that do not match with the teacher's own perspectives on good K-3 teaching; and (4) helping children see that learning itself is valuable while working within a system that teaches them that academic performance is what really matters. The paper concludes with a list of suggestions for ways to deal with K-3 teaching dilemmas. (KB)

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Dealing with the Dilemmas of K-3 Teaching

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, November, 2002, New York City

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Dealing with the Dilemmas of K-3 Teaching

This paper is a reflective dialog around the special circumstances of teaching in contemporary K-3 classrooms. Three teachers who were prepared to teach in a program that emphasized an understanding of principles of developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) describe their experiences teaching in public school classrooms where the implementation of DAP is constrained in significant ways. The paper highlights dilemmas K-3 teachers face as they work to implement programs that they think are appropriate and effective for their students while accommodating the expectations of systems that demand accountability and often limit what is to be taught and how it should be taught.

Dilemmas are circumstances that force a choice between equally unfavorable alternatives. Teaching can be characterized as a series of problems to be solved or decisions to be made. When no "clearly best" solutions are readily available for the problems at hand or no "clearly best" alternatives are apparent for decisions that need to be made, teachers face the uncomfortable prospect of dealing with dilemmas. This paper is about how three K-3 teachers deal with teaching dilemmas in their everyday practice.

The questions that organized this discussion grew from the identification of four dilemmas that characterize K-3 teaching. The first dilemma is particular to teachers who know about and care about providing developmentally appropriate practices for young children. These teachers are committed to the principles of DAP, but their work in systems that demand academic achievement at all costs places them between a rock and a hard place when it comes to providing educational programs. The question defining this dilemma becomes: *How do you deal with pressures for academic achievement and provide experiences that are developmentally appropriate?* A second dilemma is one that finds expression in almost all classrooms because teachers are responsible for managing a large group of students and making sure that the group is progressing at a satisfactory rate. At the same time, every group is made up of individual students with different strengths, weaknesses, and needs, and teachers have to pay attention to the individual differences to be sure everyone is successful. The question is: *How do you meet the needs of individual children while keeping the whole classroom running smoothly?* A third teaching dilemma is about the general mismatch between the philosophies teachers bring to their work and the expectations of the other adults who influence their teaching environments. The question that frames this dilemma is: *How do you deal with expectations from administrators, parents, and other teachers that do not match with your own perspectives on good K-3 teaching?* A final dilemma is around the

issue of what children are learning about the value of learning and about themselves as learners from the ways that classrooms operate. When what is valued in school is reduced to academic achievement (i.e., assessment outcomes), teachers face a dilemma if they want children to be academically successful and to experience learning as a joyful and personally meaningful activity. This leads to the question: How *do you help children see that learning itself is valuable while working within a system that teaches them that academic performance is what really matters?*

The teacher-authors of this paper work in different kinds of schools (rural, suburban, and inner city), they teach in public school classrooms (a kindergarten, a first grade, and a third grade), and they are thoughtful, resourceful teachers who have shown the ability to adapt in their own ways to the dilemmas discussed. The body of the paper includes examples of how three young teachers (none of whom has been teaching for more than four years) deal with the realities of teaching in public school K-3 classrooms. After brief introductions to the authors and their settings, each teacher answers the questions that organize this paper.

Ginger McDaniel, Kindergarten

I am a Caucasian woman who has been teaching for three years. I earned my M.S. degree in elementary education from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I

completed a one-year internship as part of my Master's program, and I am licensed to teach kindergarten through grade 8. All of my teaching so far has been in kindergarten at Dogwood Elementary School in Knoxville, Tennessee.

Dogwood is a preschool-grade 5 urban elementary school with 735 students. It is classified as a Title I school, with 75% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. Approximately 25% of Dogwood's students are African American, and virtually all of the rest are Caucasian. Dogwood is a Professional Development School collaborating with the University of Tennessee in their teacher education programs. It is also one of several schools in our system participating in Project GRAD, a new initiative designed to improve performance in inner-city settings.

Mariam Isaac, First Grade

I am an African American female and the single parent of a child with special needs. This is my second teaching year, and I have taught first grade both years. I earned Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, and I did a one-year internship as part of the Master's degree and certification program. I am certified to teach in grades K-8.

I teach in a brand new suburban school. It is the first and only school to be built within the Lakeland city limits. Before Lakeland Elementary was built, the students

attended three feeder schools. The Lakeland community is growing rapidly, and new houses are being built all around the school and across the school zone. In the 2001-2002 school year, our student population consisted of the following: Caucasian 561, African American 88, Asian 14, and Native American 3.

Heather Brooks, Third Grade

I am a twenty-six-year-old Caucasian female in my fourth year of teaching third grade at Lenoir City Elementary School. I received my B.S. from the University of Tennessee with a major in math. I also received my M.S. in Curriculum and Instruction from UT. The M.S. included a yearlong internship, along with classes during the school year and summer. I am currently working on my Educational Specialist degree in reading at UT. I will be finishing in the summer of 2003.

The school in which I teach is the only elementary school in a rural, eastern Tennessee school district. We currently have 658 students enrolled in our school, with 68% of the children coming from low-income families. Our student body is predominately Caucasian, with 17% being Hispanic and 2% other. We offer a variety of programs to meet the many needs of our students, including an arts program in which our students attend music, art, library, guidance, and physical education classes once a week. We also have a Family Resource Center that provides classes for parents to complete

their high school degrees as well as improve their parenting techniques. Our Family Resource Center also meets many of our students' needs for food, clothes, and school supplies. We have a growing Hispanic program in which volunteers work with our ESL students. Our ESL teacher also organizes a summer program so that students retain what they have learned over the summer.

Amos Hatch, Teacher Education Professor

I am a Caucasian male with 30 years of experience in early childhood education. From my first experiences volunteering in Head Start in Salt Lake City through my K-3 teaching in Kansas City, Missouri and Jacksonville, Florida to my university work in Ohio and Tennessee, I have remained focused on improving the life chances of young children and supporting teachers in their important work.

At the University of Tennessee, I helped create the Inclusive Early Childhood Education program, an alternative approach that prepares teachers to work in settings that include children with disabilities. Mariam and Heather are graduates of that program, and I taught Ginger in the Kindergarten Methods course I regularly offer. I spent the 2001-2002 school year volunteering each Wednesday in Ginger's kindergarten classroom at Dogwood.

1. How do you deal with pressures for academic achievement and provide experiences that are developmentally appropriate?

Ginger: As a kindergarten teacher in today's public education system, I think it is impossible not to feel the pressure for academic achievement. But, I feel more pressure to have each child reach his/her full potential. It is my personal accountability that prompts me to provide experiences that are developmentally appropriate. I want students to learn, but at the same time, I want them to develop a life-long love of learning.

When I plan activities for my students, I first look at the Kindergarten goals and objectives for my school district. I then think about ways to achieve these goals in meaningful and purposeful ways. Next, I evaluate where each student is developmentally at the given time, taking into account the students' diversity (cultural and academic). I then tailor activities to meet the goals and objectives.

I believe the critical element in academic achievement is for students to actively participate in the learning. Passive learning is neither developmentally appropriate, nor effective for promoting academic achievement. One of the ways students actively participate is to verbally express themselves with both teacher and peers. In our classroom, we regularly engage in activities that provide students with opportunities to work together in pairs and small groups. In these setting, students communicate with one

another, problem solve, and collaborate with peers. One example of working in pairs is when students "read and write the room" with a buddy. One student holds a reading pointer and reads the print that is found throughout the classroom, including environmental print, labels, charts, sight words, posters, and signs. The other child is the recorder/writer. S/he writes down what the reader is reading on a piece of paper attached to a clipboard. Students take turns in the roles of reader and writer. Then, the pair shares the information gathered with the rest of the class. This one activity ensures that academic objectives are achieved. It also allows students to develop self-confidence, build a sense of group unity, and explore the world around them in a meaningful way.

Mariam: I did not realize until I was in the school system how much pressure teachers are under to get their students to achieve academically. My principal does not place a heavy emphasis on achieving academic success in the lower grades, perhaps because we are a brand new school. She does expect the first grade teachers to work together as a team to insure that children are learning.

I do feel pressure from the state standards for first graders, and I feel like I have compromise sometimes. When I started teaching, I tried to make sure that my students were right on target with the state's curriculum guide. I was working myself to death trying to keep up with all of the standards. Our state even has the standards posted by the

months in which children are supposed to achieve particular objectives. I believe that some of these exceptions are impossible to satisfy and still do what's best for children. I believe that teaching only the state standards does not leave room for other activities, so I try to combine fun activities with meeting the state standards.

In my school, pressure for academic achievement comes mostly from parents. The way I deal with this is to make sure that I have a professional relationship with each student's parents. I tell them my home phone number and give them an open invitation to call me if they have any questions. I have parents come in and read to the class, and I try to make them feel welcome at anytime.

Heather: I fell so strongly about the importance of developmentally appropriate practices that they drive most of what I do. The exception being the couple of weeks before our standardized tests. During this time, I am guilty of teaching to the test. I am fortunate to work in a system where administrators trust teachers to do the teaching. As long as we can provide evidence that our practices are both appropriate and effective, then administrators let us proceed in the manner that we believe is best for our students.

I also have the support of my third grade teaching team. They are all very knowledgeable about the practices that are appropriate for our students. We work together as a team to teach in ways that we know are developmentally appropriate. When

the situation arises that our administration is putting pressure on us to push academic pressure onto our students, we can respond as a team and discuss these issues in a professional manner.

2. How do you meet the needs of individual children while keeping the classroom running smoothly?

Ginger: In our whole group activities, every child participates and is challenged to the extent of his/her ability. An example of this is when the entire class is involved in an interactive writing activity. Some students are able to compose entire sentences almost independently. These students are encouraged to do so. Other students are able to write small phrases and sight words. These students contribute to the writing assignment to the best of their ability. Lastly, there are the students who need help sounding out a word to write in the story. Their peers and I help them with these steps. I stress that it takes each person in our room to make the story complete. Everyone validates every child's attempt. I truly believe in the power of being a community of learners—a community where everyone has an important contribution to make.

Another activity my class regularly engages in is mixing and fixing sentences. I write out a sentence on a sentence strip for every student in the classroom. The student

then cuts the sentence into individual words and mixes the words up. Then, the student reconstructs and reads the sentence. Some students have 5-6 word sentences, other students have 3-4 word sentences, and others have 2 word sentences. This allows every child to be working on the same type of assignment, while being challenged on his or her own ability level. I work really hard to have all students feel that they contribute to our classroom. This greatly helps in meeting individual needs and having a class that runs smoothly.

Mariam: I keep the classroom running smoothly by keeping a routine. I make sure that every student in my classroom knows what s/he should be doing throughout the day. I make this routine run smoothly by starting it on the first day of school. I make sure that the students are given enough work to keep them very busy. I also keep a basket of extra work available to the classroom. If students finish their work early, they can go to this basket and take out activities that they can complete independently (often involving cutting, pasting, and coloring). This is the time when I will pull my students who need my one-on-one attention and work with them individually. I also use my classroom assistant to work with these students outside of the classroom. I use him to review words and other skills. Another resource I use in the classroom is the school's tutoring program. This program helps the students who are struggling get help from an older

student. This helps my children learn, but I believe that it helps with both students' self-esteem. So establishing a routine and keeping children engaged help keep the room running smoothly and make it possible for me and others to work with students to meet their individual needs.

Heather: Just as a teacher wears many "hats," s/he must be armed with an incredible amount of strategies that will meet the needs of each child. Although at times it feels like the entrance to my classroom should be a revolving door, my students (as well as myself) must have some kind of structure. I begin the year by discussing my expectations so that children are aware of exactly what they should be doing at all times. This helps to eliminate problems that could arise as I am spending individual time with a student. One strategy that I find most helpful is peer tutoring. While it is important not to rely on this too heavily, it is a strategy that can benefit both students involved.

Another strategy I find useful is modifying assignments. I can easily modify an assignment for a student so that the student is still practicing the necessary skill; they just may not have as many problems, sentences, or tasks to complete as other students. Also, I am very lucky in that my school participates in an intern program with the University of Tennessee. This means that, at times, I have another adult in the room, so that enables me to give more one-on-one attention to the students who need it. Our school is also

fortunate to have a volunteer program that offers support as well. I think it is also important to use the resources in your school. For example, if I need help with particular issues or particular children, I talk to our special education teachers to get more ideas.

3. How do you deal with expectations from administrators, parents, and other teachers that do not match your own perspectives on good K-3 teaching?

Ginger: My approach to this dilemma is a preemptive one. I tell administrators, parents, and other teachers my philosophy of education. I give them many examples of the ways I teach and the benefits this type of teaching has for the whole child, and they are invited to observe anytime in the classroom.

One of the biggest misconceptions in early childhood education is that children cannot play and learn at school simultaneously. Too many people feel that play is not a purposeful task that has educational merit. I believe that play is a child's work. When play activities are structured appropriately and continually assessed, they have just as many educational benefits as other ways of teaching. When engaging in play activities, students are learning and applying basic concepts and skills. Play also engages learners in higher ordered thinking activities that will better equip them to be self-sufficient thinkers and learners. Play requires students to work together, create, hypothesize, and

problem solve. It provides meaningful opportunities to predict, reason, and imagine. There are many social, emotional, and cognitive benefits of incorporating play into daily classroom activities. Explaining these benefits to others is part of my job.

Mariam: The expectations from my principal are high. I am in a new school and I was the only new teacher the principal hired, so the expectations are very high. Right now, I am doing my best to stay one step ahead. I am trying to meet the expectations by staying late after school and by working closely with the rest of the teachers. If I have a question about anything, I try to handle it in a professional way. Sometimes I go into my room and just take a break.

I do not believe that a good teacher checks in at the start of the day and leaves when the students go home, but do I believe that good teachers are well-rounded persons. They are able to do their job to the best of their ability and still maintain a personal life. They try to be there (physically and emotionally) for everyone, but they know when and how to take time for themselves.

I try to be very flexible since I am a new teacher. Sometimes, I feel that I cannot speak up and voice my opinion because I do not have tenure. Whenever the state is in a budget crunch or the local district does not have enough to balance the budget, I am afraid that they will start cutting jobs. Since I do not have tenure, I will be the first one to

go. I believe that until I have earned tenure, I need to remain flexible and sometimes compromise more to satisfy those who have power over my future.

Heather: I feel confident in my knowledge and training as a professional. When my perspectives do not match with my administrators', I can discuss this with them and show them evidence that supports my philosophies. When my perspectives do not match those of my students' parents, again, I discuss this with them. However, I believe that while I, as a teacher, am an expert on the "average" child, parents are the experts on their own children. I try to blend their ideas and perspectives with my own.

When my perspectives do not match those of other teachers, I try to show by example. I do not believe that cramming my philosophies down my colleagues' throats is the most effective way to prove my point. I continue to do the teaching practices that I know are most beneficial to my students. For example, during my first year of teaching, many of the teachers in my school had the students sitting in rows, which to me indicated little cooperative learning. In my classroom, the students sat in cooperative learning groups because this way of teaching and learning is central in my philosophy. After a few months, I had teachers coming to me wanting to know what I was doing because my children were working so well together. Instead of forcing something I felt strongly about on them (especially since I was the "new teacher"), I tried to lead by example.

4. How do you help children see that learning itself is valuable while working within a system that teaches them that academic performance is what really matters?

Ginger: Helping children see that learning itself is inherently valuable is something that starts day one in my classroom. One of the teacher's major roles is to make her/his students believe that they can accomplish anything. I provide lots of praise and continuous constructive feedback. I provide students with activities that they can achieve, but are challenging to them. Encouraging and providing opportunities for students to engage in experiences that require risk-taking is critical in enabling students to value learning for the sake of learning.

I think it is also important for students to realize that it is ok to be wrong. Sometimes, the most worthwhile learning experiences stem from times when "plan A" does not work. There are many approaches that can be taken to any given activity. Students need to feel they are in a nurturing environment that allows them to explore other possibilities when the first attempt is not successful.

Every teacher feels the pressure of standardized test scores. However, it is very important not to pass the pressure on to the students (especially at such an early age). As educators, we need to ban together to lobby for other criteria for judging students', and

subsequently, teachers' performance. We know about multiple intelligences, but most of those intelligences are never utilized on a standardized test. We need to work together to see that other educational information is used along with standardized tests scores when evaluating the learning that is taking place in the classroom.

Mariam: I have a difficult time answering this question because the school system pushes academics so much that it is hard not to get caught up in the system's way of thinking. I feel that teachers are backed into a corner and that they do not have a choice but to push academics. Everybody, and I mean everybody, is looking at the students' test scores. Nobody, from the White House and Congress to the parents, is looking at children as individuals—they see only test scores. I am relieved that I am not in an upper elementary grade where they push standardized testing because I would be held accountable just like the other teachers. I believe testing and accountability are why so many good teachers are leaving the education profession. Teachers are not being judged on their abilities; they are being judged on their test scores. I am in a first grade, and I can still do things that are non-academic, like an art project or something that is just for the students. Even so, I still feel pressure from the administration, parents, and other teachers to get kids ready for the standardized tests.

Heather: I do my best to keep the "drill and kill" out of my third grade classroom. Generally, about two weeks before the tests, we practice really hard with test taking skills. I do believe that this is something that they need to know how to do because most of the tests they take throughout their lives will have this format. However, I do not make this the focus of their learning throughout the year. I feel that as long as I am covering the skills that I am expected to teach, my students will do well on the standardized tests.

On the other hand, keeping the administration's focus on the tests out of my classroom is becoming harder and harder. For example, this past year, our school had a party for the three students who scored highest in each class. My solution was that my class had its own party while those students were gone. I continue to tell my students that what is important is that they do their best always, and if they do this they should feel successful. I think that because I truly believe this and my students trust me, they believe it too. My students know that the focus of school and their lives should be on a love of learning in order to educate themselves and make themselves better people.

In Conclusion

Dealing with dilemmas is part of the fabric of K-3 teaching. Complex decisions about complex problems have to be made, and pat answers don't work. In this paper, we

discussed three teachers' ways of dealing with four common dilemmas. We'll conclude by presenting a list of general strategies for dealing with dilemmas. These were inductively generated from an analysis of the answers to the questions addressed here. These suggest possible patterns of reaction, not a definitive list of all the possibilities. We hope they will provide some help to others who face the dilemmas of K-3 teaching. We think the last two suggestions ("Give yourself a break" and "Don't expect to resolve dilemmas") are central to all the others. If issues like those discussed in this paper could be resolved, they would not be dilemmas. So, give yourself a break, step back and assess what's going on, reflect on what you believe, evaluate your alternatives, summon up all of your professional expertise and judgment, and do the best you can.

Ways to Deal with K-3 Teaching Dilemmas

- **Have a variety of strategies for addressing classroom problems**
- **Be flexible enough to accommodate changing circumstances**
- **Trust your own professional judgment**
- **Have confidence in your philosophy and methods**
- **Be proactive in letting others know what you believe**
- **Set an example to show others how well of your approaches work**
- **Utilize all the resources you have at hand**
- **Develop good relationships with all the stakeholders in your classroom**
- **Find others who can give you support**
- **Don't pass your stress along to students**
- **Lobby, advocate, speak out for what you believe**
- **Look for common ground when conflicts arise**
- **Compromise when necessary**
- **Keep a balance between your professional and personal lives**
- **Give yourself a break (figuratively and literally)**
- **Don't expect to resolve dilemmas**

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